

Wilderness at Petrified Forest National Park



North unit of the Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area

Wilderness Hiking and Camping

The Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area was one of the first two designated in the National Park System. What is wilderness? The concept is different for everyone. Artists may see shapes and color; backpackers anticipate an adventure; legislators define it in legal terms. In general, wilderness is a place where the human imprint is minimal. In 1964 Congress passed the Wilderness Act, restricting grazing, mining, timber cutting and mechanized vehicles in these areas. Wilderness Areas are protected and valued for their ecological, historical, scientific and experiential resources. The Petrified Forest Wilderness Area consists of over 50,000 acres of mesas, buttes, badlands, and scattered areas of grasslands.

No permits are required for day hiking. Wilderness hiking offers the opportunity to visit sites seldom seen by most park visitors. There are no developed trails; hiking is cross-country. Clear air, sparse vegetation, and a variety of landmarks combine to make hiking conditions excellent. Be prepared! There is no water and little shade in the backcountry. A gallon of water per person per day is recommended in summer months. Day hikers must be back at their vehicles by the park’s posted closing time.

There are two units in the **Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area**. The **Painted Desert unit** is at the north end of the park, accessed from Kachina Point. The trailhead can be found on the northwest side of the Painted Desert Inn National Historic Landmark. Campers must hike at least one linear mile from the trailhead at Kachina Point or north of the Lithodendron Wash. The **Rainbow Forest unit** is at the south end of the park, accessed from the parking area at mile marker 24 south of the Flattops. In the Rainbow Forest unit, campers must hike at least a half mile southeast of the main park road near the Flattops. There are no maintained campsites in the wilderness areas.

Horseback riding and pack animals are permitted in the wilderness. All information and regulations contained in this article pertain to horse use in the wilderness.

A permit for backcountry camping may be obtained for a maximum of 14 consecutive days. The campsite must be relocated every three days to minimize impacts on the resource. Camping is allowed for not more than a total of 30 days in any calendar year park -wide. All permit applicants must read and sign the permit conditions sheet before being issued a permit.

Regulations:

- Collection of plants, rocks, petrified wood, fossils, archeological objects or other materials is illegal everywhere in the park.
- No bicycles, motorized vehicles, firearms, or pets are allowed in the Wilderness Area.
- Camping in the park without a permit is prohibited.
- Group size for staying in the Wilderness Area overnight is limited to eight (8) person per group. Use of campsites is limited to eight (8) persons.
- No wood or charcoal fires are allowed (use fuel stoves). The use of solar, propane/butane, and white gas fueled stoves is allowed in wilderness camping areas. Charcoal fires are not allowed in wilderness camping areas.
- Bury human waste. Pack out your trash.



South unit of the Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area

Horseback Riding and Pack Animals

The park offers diverse riding and packing opportunities in the Petrified Forest National Wilderness Area. Animals designated as pack animals are horses, burros, mules, and llamas.

- When using parking areas, please leave room for other visitors to park.
- Park your trailer so that it does not interfere with vehicle traffic flow.
- Follow all park regulations.
- Clean up after horses in improved areas (parking lots, paved areas, etc).
- All food and water must be packed in. Feed must be certified weed-free.
- Do not leave horses unattended, to prevent encounters with other park visitors. Free-trailing or loose-herding is not permitted. Horses are prohibited on paved trails, paved roads and around visitor use areas.
- Water for horses may be obtained at the service station by the Painted Desert Visitor Center. No water is available in the wilderness areas.
- Animals are limited to six (6) per group.

The trail down to the northern unit of the Wilderness Area can be very steep with an unstable surface. While there are no maintained trails in the wilderness areas, there is very little grade change and riding is easy. Petrified wood is sharp and can cause damage to stock hooves. Take care of yourself, your stock, and your park.

Where can I watch the sunset over the Painted Desert without backpacking? The Painted Desert stretches from St. Johns to Cameron, covering about 1,500 square miles. There are many places to watch the sunset outside of the park. One site to visit is the Little Painted Desert County Park, north of Winslow on Highway 87.